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ABSTRACT

While numerous surveys have shown that women academics are being hired in increasing numbers, white women from working class backgrounds are disadvantaged in obtaining tenure track university positions, because they have degrees from less prestigious universities, and their backgrounds have not prepared them for the publish or perish atmosphere of academia. The socialization of working class women encourages their nurturing instinct, and this instinct promotes: (1) accepting heavy advising schedules; (2) involvement in university services and professional issues; (3) becoming attuned to female undergraduate needs; and (4) becoming role models. These women often accept heavier teaching loads as graduate students because of the extra income it provides and their own values toward teaching. These activities can fill up the time needed to do research and prepare articles for publication which plays an important role in the academic position review and the tenure review process. As a result, working class women remain relegated to instructorships and adjunct faculty positions. As feminists, the women bring a different perspective into the classroom because of their own sensitivity as outsiders. Some solutions to this problem of social class discrimination include sharpening awareness of women's diverse backgrounds, breaking down academic hierarchies, phasing out temporary positions, and replacing them with permanent appointments. (DJC)

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WORKING-CLASS WOMEN AS TEACHERS

by

Michelle M. Tokarczyk

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Working-Class Women as Teachers

Today I want to explore the situation of women who are from working class or impoverished backgrounds and teach at the college and university level. For the purposes of this discussion, I am focusing on white women: women of color have an additional set of issues with which to deal. My experience has been in English Departments so my observations are especially applicable to them.

When I envisioned this talk last fall I thought of the unique resources that academic women from lower class backgrounds could bring both to individual students and to the feminist community at large. I maintain my faith in our strength, but a combination of teacher and job search burnout have prompted me to reassess the obstacles in our way. In this talk I will thus explore the conditions under which many academic women from working-class

backgrounds teach, conditions which often exploit their gifts. I see this talk as opening a dialogue rather than giving a prescription, but it seems that indirectly I am urging an improvement in the conditions of non-tenure track workers.

Numerous surveys have shown that while women academics have been hired in increasing numbers, they tend to be concentrated in non-tenure track instructors' and adjunct positions. Many women and men who do secure tenure-track positions have degrees from prestigious universities, but the working-class woman academic is unlikely to have an Ivy League education. As a graduate student, she is further less likely than her male and middle class women colleagues to have access to the networks that get papers accepted at conferences, inform her of people doing work in her field etc. As important, she is probably less likely to truly appreciate the publish or perish phenomena that dominates academia, for as working-class writer Valerie Miner points out, it's often difficult for working-class people to see writing as work. However, teaching--the job graduate assistants are apparently paid to do--is more clearly labor. In retrospect, I regret taking extra teaching assignments rather than drafting articles while I was in graduate school. I think I acted as I did because I had been conditioned not to turn down extra income and

because I honestly could not believe my good teaching would be of so little value. My mistake is just one example of how the working-class woman's mindset hinders her in academia. This problem is depicted in Her Own Terms, a recently-published novel by Judith Grossman portraying a British woman from a working-class background at Oxford struggling to adapt to the school's academic rigors and tutorial system, and lamenting the fact that nothing in her past prepared her for this life.

The composite of circumstances I've described make it likely that if the the working-class woman gets a teaching position it will be as a non-tenure track instructor or as an adjunct. (Indeed, when I met with members of the "Working-Class Women in Academia" panel at the MLA Convention we noted that of the three of us from working class backgrounds, only one had a tenure-track appointment, and that was secured after many years of temporary positions.) Both instructorships and adjunct lines generally involve heavy teaching loads--perhaps four writing courses a semester--no job security, no possibility of sabbaticals, and, in the case of adjuncts, no benefits. Women in such positions have the best chanceof getting permanent lines that will give them security and time to do their own work, if they publish. The implicit (though sometimes explicit) advice to all young scholars is to concentrate on

one's own work and put the teaching second. For women, however, I believe this is more difficult than it si for men. Women have been socialized to nurture and, as psychologists such as Carol Gilligan point out, often define their own worth in terms of their relationship with others. For many academic women who have postponed or foregone having children, the imperative to nurture is particularly strong.

In addition to feeling a pull to nurture their students, many women, and perhaps working-class women in particular, feel a need to nurture their community. As Paul Lauter points out in his "Caste, Canon, Class" one of the things that differentiates working-class from middle class culture is that working class stresses collective rather than individual status: The term "solidarity forever" is not just a slogan. Women's culture too is marked by stress on collective welfare, for women's traditional work has often necessitated thinking of group welfare (the family). This group identification may be what prompts women to do an often disproportionate share of university service and advising or even to engage in discussions on professional issues, which, for example, some people have told me I'm crazy to do at this stage in

my career. Women from the working-class families act this way because they feel a double pull--stemming from both gender and class-- toward community affiliation.

While working class women have a strong commitment to nurturing, their students have a strong need for caring and few people to turn to. Many faculty are distant, and the receptive working-class woman is likely to be barraged by students. Moreover, there are some problems--notably sexual harassment--which students are uncomfortable discussing with male faculty. Valerie Miner's Murder in the English Department depicts an untenured woman professor's involvement in a campus-wide struggle against sexual harassment at Berkeley. Nan Weaver possesses many of the traits I've discussed: she nurtures students and has a keen awareness of what it means to be part of an underclass as both a woman and a student, and she is from the working-class. She is willing to go to extraordinary lengths in combating sexual harassment because she has experienced its devastating consequences. Many women from working-class backgrounds, having been vulnerable themselves, are acutely sensitive to other women.

They are also, having lacked guidance themselves, attuned to young women's yearning for mentors, to students' desire to know how their predecessors have "made it" (students are often unaware of how little we've made). Students who seek out working-class women academics may be responding to what I've seen as women's greater willingness to share themselves. "The personal is political," one of the landmark slogans of the feminist movement, suggests women's refusal to dichotomize not only public and private, but also personal and professional, subjective and objective. This willingness to be vulnerable may be working-class women's greatest asset for students. One of the things that made it difficult for me as a working-class graduate student was that it never seemed that others before me had struggled--financially or emotionally. While I was going through a severe financial crisis I was aided immeasurably by a woman faculty member who told me she'd gotten her undergraduate degree at Yale at night and worked at a series of menial jobs during the day.

In addition to being more willing to share themselves, working-class women academics also have a unique perspective on feminist issues to contribute to their students and to the feminist community at large. Many feminists have pointed out that insights into the movement often come from

outsiders. We can think of the healthy critique of feminism people such as June Jordan and Audre Lorde have made. Like women of color, white working class academic women are doubly marginalized and perhaps have a permanent outsider status. In Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class one of the two women interviewed, Alice Trent, states "The most important thing about my being working-class is that I identified with no group--I don't subscribe to any organized religion." (229)

Such women are acutely aware of difference, and thus likely to resist the formation of any canon, particularly a white middle class one. The working-class woman who sees a women's literature syllabus made up exclusively of writers such as Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich and Emily Dickinson may argue for the inclusion of work by writers such as Agnes Smedley, Alice Walker, and Carolyn Chute. I think, however, that the sensitivity to difference has more far-reaching implications than wanting to include material reflecting one's own class or race. Sensitivity to difference encourages people to be aware of and advocate multiple perspectives. In a recent article in New Literary History Amy Ling points out that the most visible minorities are often given a place in women's studies department, whereas, Asian American, Native American, Italian American writers and the like will probably be omitted

(unless the student population is high in one minority group). This is unavoidable; we cannot possibly represent every group. Similarly, as I talk about the working class experience I generalize, ignoring differences in region, ethnicity, income level etc. We need to be able to find a way to both recognize the diversity of experience which we cannot possibly encompass and generalize to make connections among us. Amy Ling points out that as an Asian American woman she's learned to "stretch outside her skin" to appreciate the work of men such as James Fennimore Cooper and Bernard Malamud, as well as dig into her own self to appreciate Asian American writers. Working-class readers depicted in fiction, such as Irene Tanner in Her Own Terms and Marguerite Johnson in I Know How the Caged Bird Sings, similarly show virtuosity in this stretching. The working-class woman has much to teach both the feminist community and her onw students.

To enable her to teach at her fullest potential, we must grapple with her professional status. Currently her situation is comparable to that of the child care worker--she has extensive nurturing to do with no means to nurture herself and, sometimes,with little experience of being nurtured academically. In Good-Bye Hangovers, Hello Life, a book about women alcoholics, Jean Kirkpatrick states that women alcoholics, unlike men, often drink out of a

desire for nurturance. As I thought about this I pondered how little of the kind of nurturing I try to give my students women usually get: that is, nurturing that encourages them in their abilities, pushes them to their fullest potential, and encourages their own development rather than what I envision for them. Women in general receive little of this sort of nurturing, and women academics from the working class are placed in an academic underclass that replicates their social underclass, thus causing feelings of pain, anger and inferiority to reverberate.

I'd like to end by suggesting answers, but they're both too obvious--break down academic hierarchies, phase out temporary positions and adjunct lines and replace them with permanent appointments--and too difficult to work for at this time. Perhaps what we need to do is strengthen our sisterly commitment to helping one another. As important, we need to sharpen our awareness of women's diverse backgrounds. Then we can begin to realize both the issues and the strengths that arise from them.